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THE BIBLICAL AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL CON-
CEPTION OF GOD. I.

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The Bible and philosophy both fix the attention of men upon the same Object of knowledge and belief. But the points of starting, the methods of procedure, and the results to be attained, are very different in the two cases. The biblical writers present God as seen by the eye of childlike faith; they illustrate his attributes and works, in figures of speech that admit of an indefinite expanse of meaning; their purpose is to awaken and edify the religious life. Philosophy, on the other hand, avowedly assumes the rational point of view. It aims to discover and justify to the eye of reason the valid conception of absolute Being; it is only indirectly interested in promoting the practical interests of the life of religion.

But the mind of man is a unity. It does not quietly tolerate aspects of truth that apparently lead to contrary conclusions; much less does it rest satisfied with holding tenets that imply fundamentally opposite principles of all being and all knowledge. The strife which has often arisen between the views of God (his attributes and his relation to the world) held by students of the Bible and those held by students of philosophy is a constant witness to a demand for reconciliation. The demand arises from the essential unity of the human mind.

God is One, eternal and immutable, although he has revealed himself progressively and under various forms of representation, to the mind of man. Biblical revelation is a gradual unfolding of a certain true conception which God would have us possess of Himself. Human reason, too, is one; the principles which control its development are unchanging. To it God speaks in revelation; within it he

makes himself more and more fully known. As a matter of fact and history, the views taken by biblical religion and the philosophical conceptions of any age have always been closely allied.

I believe that the conception of God and his relations to the world derived from study of the biblical writers, and the conception held by the philosophy of religion, are constantly approaching each other, in several most important particulars. This is due both to improved methods of studying the Bible, and also to a larger and more genial view of those important facts with which philosophy attempts to deal.

The biblical view of God has been misrepresented, in all ages, chiefly by two classes of interpreters. These are the literalists and the allegorizers. The former have been the more faithful to the grammatical and historical principles of interpretation; they have told us, in the more trustworthy way, what the biblical writers meant so far as the most obvious inferences from their expressions are concerned. But the literalists have always made the thoughts of the biblical writers clash with the truths of science and philosophy. This they have done because they would not recognize the gradualness of revelation, and the "soul of truth" given by God to the world as enveloped in imperfect literal form.

The allegorizers, on the other hand, have frequently been desirous to commend the biblical conceptions to men familiar with the current science and philosophy. They have recognized the important fact that the language of the biblical writers often concealed, while it conveyed, the essential ideas which God meant to give the world. But in their effort to uncover and commend this essential truth the allegorizers have dealt unfairly and unscientifically with the letter of Scripture. In recognition of the deficiencies of either form of interpretation many of the early writers were inclined to insist that the Sacred writings, in general, admit and require *both* of these forms. Every passage, therefore, needed to have a literal *and* an allegorical meaning extracted from it.

Those Alexandrine Jews who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the writers of the Septuagint) showed that they were ashamed of its so-called "anthropomorphism." It

seemed to them to represent God as being what Matthew Arnold called a "non-natural man." They were living in the midst of a notable development of the Platonic philosophy; and to this philosophy many of the Old-Testament expressions respecting the divine Being and his activities appeared unphilosophical, and even vulgar and shocking. In their very work of translation, therefore, these Jews embodied not a few concessions to the current philosophy. They softened many expressions and omitted others,—such as, e. g., those concerning the mouth, ears, and nose of God.

The Alexandrine Church-fathers—Clement, Cyprian, Origen—made free and unwarrantable use of allegory, in order to reconcile the biblical with their philosophical conception of God. Origen, especially, was ready to admit that the literal interpretation alone leads us into many offensive, scandalous, and impossible notions of Deity and his works. Who is so foolish, he asks, as to believe that the world existed three days without sun, moon, and stars, and one day even without the heavens? or that God, after the fashion of some common gardener, planted trees in paradise? or that the trees of life, and of the knowledge of good and evil, were visible and palpable wood, bearing fruit made to be chewed with bodily teeth?

But this way of reconciling, by wild, unlicensed allegory, the biblical and the philosophical conceptions of God, was too unscientific, linguistically, and too mischievous, theologically, to meet with final and complete success.

The Protestant theology, after the Reformation, bitterly and persistently fought science and philosophy, using as a weapon the literal interpretation of the Bible as throughout identical with the Word of God. It insisted that Jehovah made the world exactly as the biblical writer, literally understood, held that he made it—viz. in six ordinary days, and according to the method which Mr. Huxley has ridiculed as the "carpenter theory." It persistently taught that God inspired the actors in Old-Testament scenes with the feelings which they ascribed to him;—whatever Christian ethics may have to say with reference to the rightness of those feelings. It framed and filled in a picture of the Divine attributes and

relations to the world that was sketched after the figures of speech which the Hebrew Scriptures employed, with little or no account taken of the essential truth embodied by the symbols, or of the progressive character of the entire revelation set forth in these scriptures.

But the candid student of philosophy should be the last person to maintain that the writers on the philosophy of religion, contemporaneous with these mistaken interpreters of the Bible, were consistent—not to say infallible—in their dealing with that witness to God which human reason gives. The (neo-Platonic) conception of the Divine Being, to which the translators of the Septuagint wished to conform the expressions of the Hebrew Scriptures, was an imperfect and not fully rational conception. The philosophy in the midst of which the Alexandrine Church-fathers lived, and according to which they interpreted Christianity, is as obsolete now as are the commentaries of that day. Imperishable truths were held by that philosophy, as well as embodied in those commentaries. And yet—I repeat—both the philosophy and the biblical theology of the period of Clement and Origen belong to phases of life that are now passed by.

The seventeenth century was powerfully exercised in the effort to establish, on immovable grounds of reason, true conceptions of God and of his relations to nature and to man. With Descartes the argument for the existence of the Divine Being was not a matter of secondary importance in his philosophical system. It was no side issue which led him into the proof that a “most perfect Being” really exists. The proof was absolutely essential to the integrity of his system. If he could not show that God certainly is, he could not prove that the world of finite beings really is; and all the *science* which he had been so fondly building since his boyhood days might well be no more than a dream.

The soul of Père Malebranche, the second greatest thinker of France, was absorbed in the philosophical contemplation and love of the conception of God. In his view also, the Divine Being is the only ground and guarantee of all other knowledge, whether of science or philosophy. Spinoza has been called “that God-intoxicated man.” He broke with all

the current biblical conceptions, not only as they were set forth by the Jewish communion from which he sprung, but also by all the Catholic and Protestant theologians. Yet the centre and the circumference of his philosophical system is his idea of God. Leibnitz, and the contemporaneous thinkers of Great Britain, manifest the same philosophical interest in this grandest of all human thoughts. And later on, the men most detested by the theologians of the day—even those whose names have become a by-word in religious circles, as Rousseau and Voltaire and Thomas Paine—abundantly professed faith and reverence toward the Divine Being.

But, as I have already declared, it was not the fault solely of the conception professedly derived from the Bible, that men did not see eye to eye in looking for the true and satisfying conception of God. With all its show of reason the philosophical idea of these thinkers was worse than inadequate; it was in certain respects, inconsistent and irrational.

God became regarded as an abstraction, became separated from the world of finite things and finite minds, in the Deism of the last century. Many even of the preachers and theologians were so influenced by the current philosophy that certain of their religious conceptions became “bloodless,” and useless for all purposes of practical morals and religion. A writer upon the doctrine of the Spirit, in the early part of this century, exclaims: “It is more than probable that the Indians in North America, when they pray to the Great Spirit, conceive by that of something more sensible and more alive, than many of our preachers and makers of religious books, when they with great pathos style God a Spirit.”

Let us by no means fail to grasp the import of these and similar facts of history. They show that the students of philosophy have objected to the conception of God which students of the Bible have derived from its writings, because this conception seemed to them irrational. On the other hand, the latter have objected to the philosophical conception as too abstract, pale, cold, and powerless to move the heart and shape the life of morality and religion. Without doubt each party to this controversy has had good reason to complain of the other in these regards. Theology has, far too

often, flouted at reason; philosophy has, much too frequently, failed sympathetically and faithfully to regard the facts and truths of biblical revelation.

But it is not my purpose merely to rehearse and emphasize anew these old complaints of philosophy against biblical study and of biblical study against philosophy. It is rather my purpose to affirm the truth that both parties have been unfaithful to *the avowed principles of their respective pursuits*, on their own grounds. The understanding of the Bible which has given rise to irrational conceptions of God has been largely misunderstanding. The conclusions of philosophy, which have given rise to conceptions of God irreconcilable with biblical truth, have been in violation or partial neglect of reason. What is needed is neither the submission of reason to biblical theology, nor the rationalizing of Sacred Scripture. What is chiefly needed is—for the student of the Bible, a more correct, comprehensive, and unprejudiced interpretation of its writings; and, for the student of philosophy, a more appreciative and thorough acquaintance with all the data furnished by the concrete and full life of reason.

What, then, will take place, if we suppose that both philosophy and biblical study are greatly improved in their respective spheres? The interpreter of the Bible will constantly bear in mind the meaning of the historical setting in which the divine Self-revelation, whose history the sacred writings give, has taken place. He will understand the gradualness of biblical revelation. He will consider that it began with a disclosure of God to those who were in need of a child's religious education. He will note the presence of great and eternal truths about the Divine Being and his relations to the world,—embodied, however, in historical narrative, in symbols and figures of speech, in temporary ceremony and laws; and even (it may well enough be) in legends, parables, and myths. He will not suppose that the whole truth which the Scriptures have to disclose is expressed in any one passage. He will not assume that any passage, or number of passages, express *truth* at all, if they are considered apart from all the historical limitations which belong to them. He will never forget that even the complete bibli-

cal conception of God deals chiefly with one aspect of the Absolute Divine Life—with God as Redeemer, and in a way to influence the life of religious faith and conduct.

And what will the philosopher do, if he, in his own sphere of investigation and by his peculiar methods of discovering and certifying the permanent principles of all Being and Knowledge, remains faithful to his task? He will notice that faith belongs to all knowledge, whether knowledge come by perception, self-consciousness, or reasoning. He will consider that the ethical, æsthetical, and distinctively religious nature of man, furnishes facts and principles with which he is bound to come to terms of understanding and sympathy. He will recognize the truth which a recent writer has expressed as follows: "Religion I saw was like an expansive force which would shatter any man-made system of philosophy, unless that system were a true image of the universe itself. Nothing can be true which does not find a place, in the theory, for that passionate determination of the mind to God," etc. But, especially, will he see that the facts, truths, and principles of biblical religion are among the most potent and significant of factors in that progressive self-revelation of the Divine Being which it is the philosopher's aim, as fully as possible, to comprehend.

It is plain, then, how the reconciliation of conflicts between the biblical and the philosophical conceptions of God is to be reached; if ever it be reached at all. It will not be by either party surrendering unconditionally to the other. Philosophy will never yield again the freedom it won when it broke loose from its mediæval service to the current theology. Cries of "rationalism," "heresy," and what not, have no place or influence here. The business of philosophy is to be rational. The conception of God it frames is designed to express the entire content of the witness of reason to the Object of religious faith, knowledge, and worship.

But the student of the Bible has as little right to "rationalize" its utterances after the fashion set by any school of speculative thinkers. Yet if he be a narrow literalist, he is no less unscientific in his exegesis than irrational in his thinking. A better, broader understanding of the real mean-

ing, of the "soul of truth," of the Scriptures is his aim. A richer, profounder, and more comprehensive knowledge of God, as derived from a survey of all data in the light of reason, is the aim of the philosopher. As biblical theology and philosophy both improve—in their own spheres and by pursuit of their own ends, by use of improved methods—all conflict between the two conceptions of God which they present will disappear.

As a matter of fact, the conflict is softening; the two conceptions are uniting to form a harmonious totality. For in reality, they are both the result of the divine self-manifestation, in two forms and channels of activity. This general claim will be illustrated, in several particulars, in following articles.